
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Capitol Hill Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	319 A Street, NE (rear)	() Consent
		(x) Concept
Meeting Date:	November 29, 2012	() Alteration
Case Number:	12-610	(x) New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Amanda Molson	(x) Demolition
		(x) Subdivision

Applicant John Fitzgerald, with plans prepared by Nelson Architects, requests concept approval for the demolition of two garages, the construction of a two-story alley dwelling, and a subdivision to combine lots. The site is located at the rear of 319 A Street, NE in the Capitol Hill Historic District, facing onto Millers Court.

Property Description

Millers Court is one of Capitol Hill's most important historic alleys, as it features inhabited alley dwellings and several early carriage houses. Millers Court is quite wide (30') along the east-west artery, with the comparatively modest alley structures facing the rear elevations of several apartment buildings along East Capitol Street and a parking lot. A narrower, 15' wide artery runs north-south from East Capitol Street to A Street.

The subject site is occupied by two, single-story garages located at the rear of 319 and 321 A Street, NE (the garages are under single ownership). Three original alley dwellings are immediately to the left (west) of the garages, and a series of carriage houses are located to both the east and west. Both garages are of brick construction with wide doors opening into the alley. While the garage directly behind 319 appears to be of more recent construction (mid-20th century perhaps), the one behind 321 appears to date to the 1880s, as shown on historic maps, and may have been used as a stable in its early years.

Proposal

The applicant proposes to demolish the two existing garages in their entirety. In place of the garages, a new single-family alley dwelling would be constructed. The structure would include parking for one car within the building. A subdivision is requested in order to combine the two parcels onto one lot that is separate and distinct from the street-facing properties at 319 and 321.

Evaluation

Demolition

HPO has looked closely at the existing garages, both in terms of their individual significance and in terms of their relationship to the surrounding context. The proposed demolition of the more contemporary garage behind 319 raises no preservation issues, but the demolition of the 19th

century accessory building behind 321 merits careful consideration. Though the Board does not yet have design guidelines distinct to the treatment of alley structures, it has begun to set a precedent on Capitol Hill and in other rowhouse neighborhoods with regard to establishing the hierarchical significance of alley structures. The Board has generally found historic alley dwellings, early warehouses, carriage houses, and large stables to be significant contributors to the character of historic districts and has thus limited demolition and major alterations in many cases. In contrast, the Board has exercised greater flexibility in the removal or alteration of one-story garages, particularly those that do not evidence distinct architectural elements such as decorative parapets, original doors, unusual materials, or special roof forms. The Board has evaluated these requests on a case-by-case request, considering the buildings themselves, the alleyscape, and the pattern of neighborhood development as a whole.

In this case, the garages are quite simple in design and construction, with the older structure behind 319 no longer featuring its original door. The garages are also somewhat minor players in the totality of this particular historic alley, which arguably features more significant carriage houses and alley dwellings. The buildings are similar to accessory structures that have received leniency from the Board in previous raze requests, and it is reasonable to grant approval for the demolition of these structures for this particular project.

New Construction

The applicant has worked closely with staff on the design of the new alley dwelling. It is proposed to be 22' in height, which is roughly comparable with the high point of the other alley dwellings in this square and in Capitol Hill's other historic alleys (Groff Court, Gessford Court, Library Court, Brown's Court, etc.). The height is also generally consistent with the Board's previous approvals of new or altered two-story alley structures on Capitol Hill, including 117 C Street, SE (HPA #11-479), 313 9th Street, SE (HPA #10-429), and 1003 E Street, SE (HPA #09-121). Holding the height at 22' in this case ensures that the building will sit comfortably in its context and not be an anomaly in the alleyscape, while still providing comfortable interior spaces.

The combined width of the two existing garages is greater than a typical alley dwelling, so scale is an important consideration in addition to height and general design. To more gracefully manage these wide proportions, the façade of the building has been detailed to be reminiscent of an alley dwelling abutted by a carriage house. This allows the garage door opening to more logically and gracefully fit into the overall design, with double doors above the garage evocative of the hayloft doors common on early carriage houses. Corresponding with the traditional design vocabulary, the building features brick construction, 2-over-2 double-hung windows with arched headers, and a four-panel entry door.

As the construction drawings are prepared, the applicants should work with HPO to finalize details such as window and door specifications, railing material, and the lintel treatment over the garage door.

Subdivision

The proposal to join together the parcels formerly occupied by the garages is consistent with the pattern of development in this square. The square is occupied by alley structures of varying sizes, some of which occupy their own lots and some of which share lots with street-facing houses. Given the overall compatibility of the new construction with the character of this alley

and with the neighborhood as a whole, creating a new lot upon which to site this alley dwelling does not raise any major preservation issues.

The project is compatible with the character of Millers Court and with the Capitol Hill Historic District as a whole. The project is a good example of how to introduce new alley structures in a manner that respects and responds to the surrounding context, the generally low height and simple design of alley structures, and the pattern of overall development typical of rowhouse neighborhoods.

The applicant has indicated that zoning relief will be requested through the Board of Zoning Adjustment at a time to follow the Board's consideration.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept to be consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff. However, this should not be construed as approval for any necessary zoning relief.